October 2026

WEX On, WEX Off?

Turning work experience into a strategic talent pipeline for the UK



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WEX on, WEX off?

Turning work experience into a strategic talent pipeline for the UK

A practical guide for employers, educators and workforce leaders

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Executive summary

Work experience is no longer a nice-to-have. It is moving to the centre of how the UK prepares young people for work.

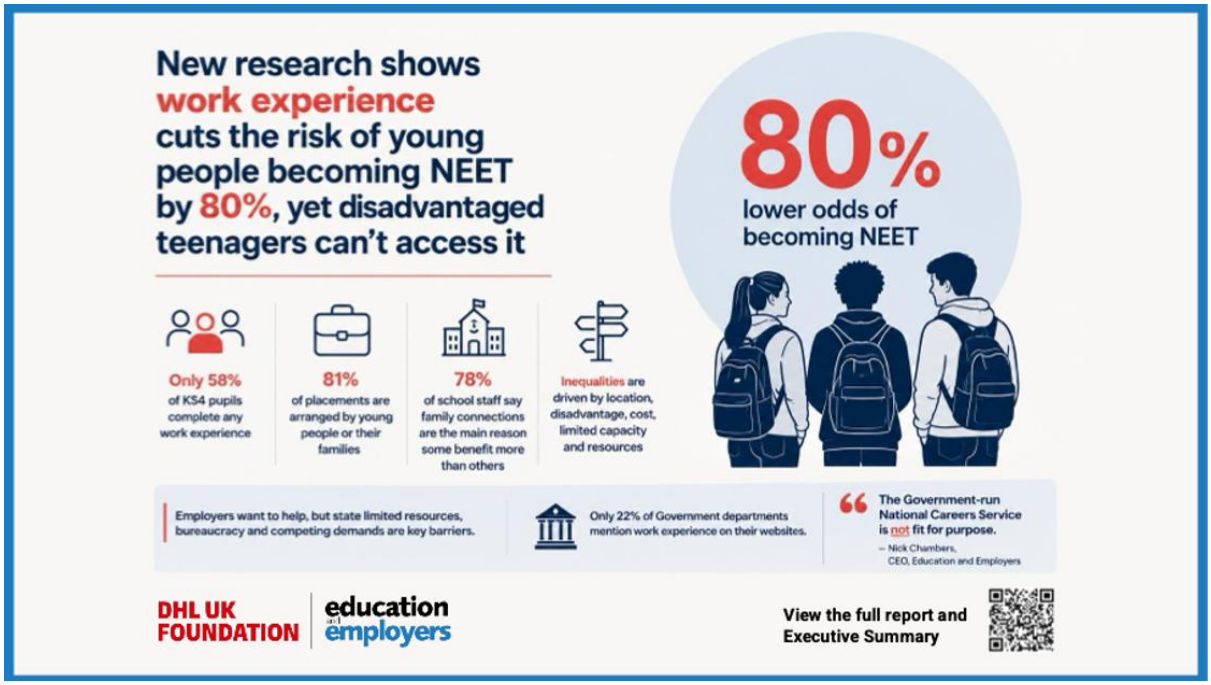
Policy has moved fast this year. New statutory guidance asks schools to give every pupil a week of employer-led activity in Years 7 to 9 and a week of workplace placements in Years 10 and 11. Universities UK has committed to work-based learning for every undergraduate by 2035. And the Prime Minister has set out a 45-day work placement for every young person between 16 and 18.



The pressure behind this is real. The number of 16 to 24 year olds not in education, employment or training (NEET) passed one million in early 2026, the highest level since 2013. Alan Milburn's review of young people and work will make its final recommendations later this year.

Cibyl research shows that 45% of Year 13 students have still not done a work experience placement, insight day or internship.

The upside is just as big. Research from Education and Employers found that young people with the most contact with employers before 16 had **80% lower odds of becoming NEET** than those with the least.



Young people want work experience. Employers value it. The gap is in access and in quality.

This paper argues that employers need to stop treating work experience as a corporate responsibility exercise and start treating it as workforce strategy. Done well, it supports:

- talent attraction
- skills development
- social mobility
- employer brand
- diversity and inclusion
- future workforce planning

For schools, colleges and universities, meaningful work experience can support:

- more informed subject and career choices
- application of learning beyond the classroom
- access to professional networks

- evidence of skills development
- progression into employment or further study

At a glance

- **Three in four** students want work experience. **One in three** want it but have had none.
- **Volunteering has fallen from 48% to 30%** since 2020, so fewer young people get a first taste of work informally.
- **Who you know still matters.** 57% of private-school students with work experience got it through family or friends, against 39% at state schools.
- **Provision is concentrated.** Two sectors provide 86% of school work experience among ISE members, and 43% of intern and placement hires are in London.
- **Nerves, not apathy, hold students back.** 46% say work experience makes them anxious and 35% are unsure what it involves.

So, WEX on or WEX off?

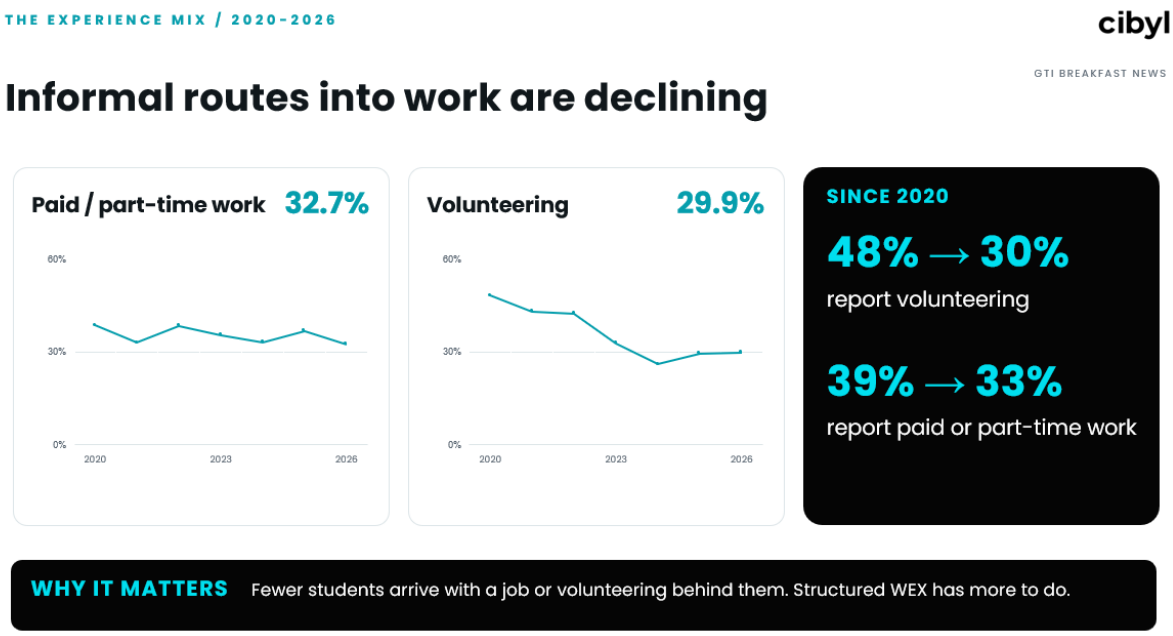
On, but done properly. The organisations that will benefit are those that open their doors to young people without the right contacts, give them real work to do, and connect the experience to what comes next.

INTRODUCTION

Why work experience is back in the national conversation

For years, many young people picked up their first experience of work without anyone planning it: a Saturday job, volunteering, the family business, summer work, a contact who could open a door.

That route is narrowing. Cibyl's School Leaver research shows volunteering has fallen from 48% to 30% since 2020, and paid or part-time work has dipped from 39% to 33%.



Source: Cibyl School Leaver Research 2020 to 2026

That puts much more weight on formal work experience. For a growing number of young people, it is no longer an extra on top of a part-time job. It is their first real contact with the workplace.

And it is happening against a backdrop of:

- economic uncertainty
- skills shortages
- competition for talent
- social mobility challenges
- technological change
- changing patterns of work

Together these put work experience firmly on the workforce strategy agenda.

CHAPTER 1

The national imperative

The case for action is stronger than it has been for a generation. In the last few months:

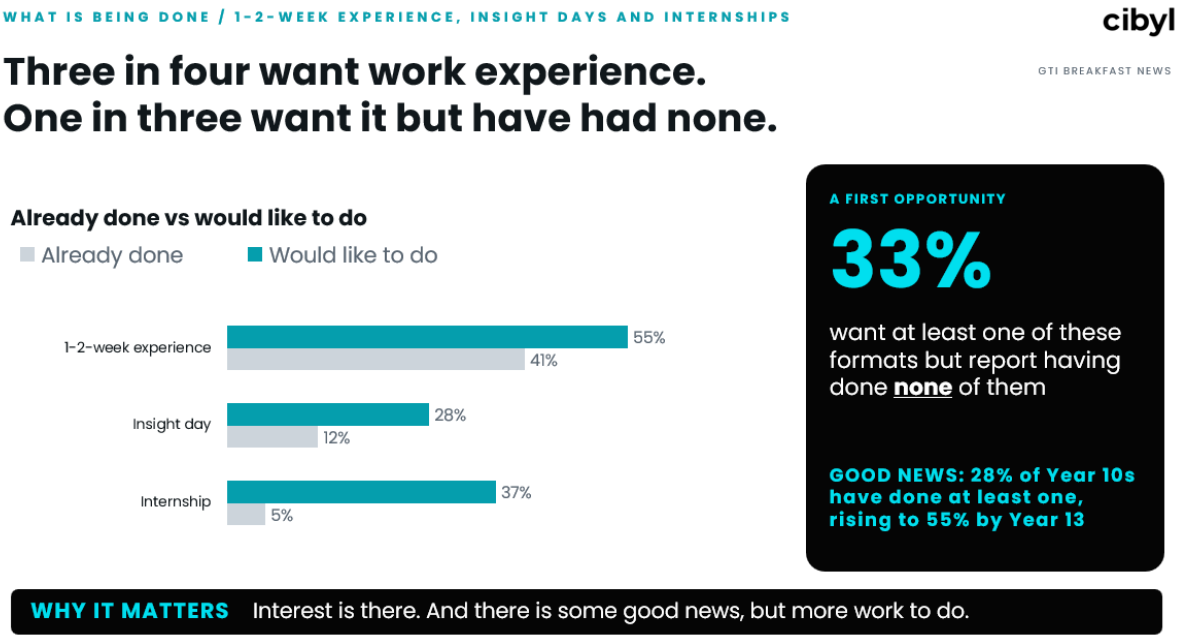
- **Schools:** DfE statutory careers guidance (June 2026) expects a week of employer-led activities across Years 7 to 9 and a week of "meaningful, in-person and immersive" placements across Years 10 and 11.
- **16 to 18:** the Prime Minister's speech to Labour conference on 29 September set out a 45-day work placement between 16 and 18.
- **Universities:** Universities UK's Future Jobs Roadmap commits to every undergraduate having the chance to do work-based learning by 2035.
- **Young people and work:** the Milburn review's interim report (May 2026) set out the scale of the NEET challenge, with final recommendations due later this year.

> **"A 45-day work placement between 16 and 18."**
>
> Prime Minister Andy Burnham, Labour Party Conference, 29 September 2026

The numbers behind this are stark. ONS figures put the number of NEET 16 to 24 year olds at 1.01 million in January to March 2026, the highest since 2013, before easing slightly to 981,000 in the spring.

Young people are not disengaged

- 84% of NEET young people want employment, education or training.
- 67% believe education does not prepare them well enough for work.
- Three in four students want work experience (Cibyl).
- One in three want it but have never had any (Cibyl).



Source: Cibyl School Leaver Research 2026

The issue is not motivation. It is access.

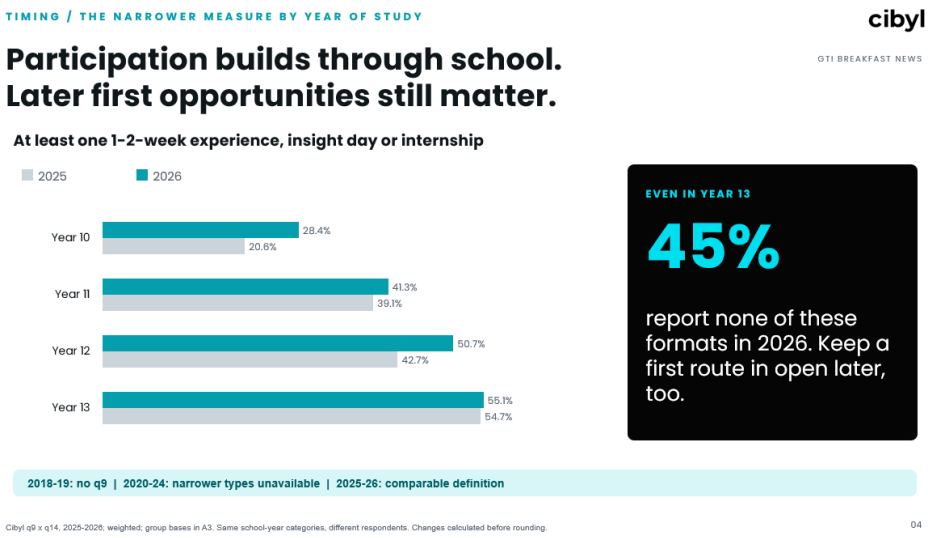
CHAPTER 2

The work experience gap

The research kept coming back to a mismatch. Young people want opportunities and employers value candidates who have had them, yet provision falls well short.

Participation comes late

Cibyl's data shows participation building through school: 28% of Year 10 students have done a placement, insight day or internship, rising to 55% by Year 13. That is up on last year, with Year 10 and Year 12 both rising by around eight points. But it still leaves 45% of Year 13s without any of these experiences as they make decisions about their next step.



Source: Cibyl School Leaver Research 2025 and 2026

Education and Employers puts the national picture in a similar place: around 58% of Key Stage 4 students do any work experience, and 81% of young people rely on family and friends to find a placement.

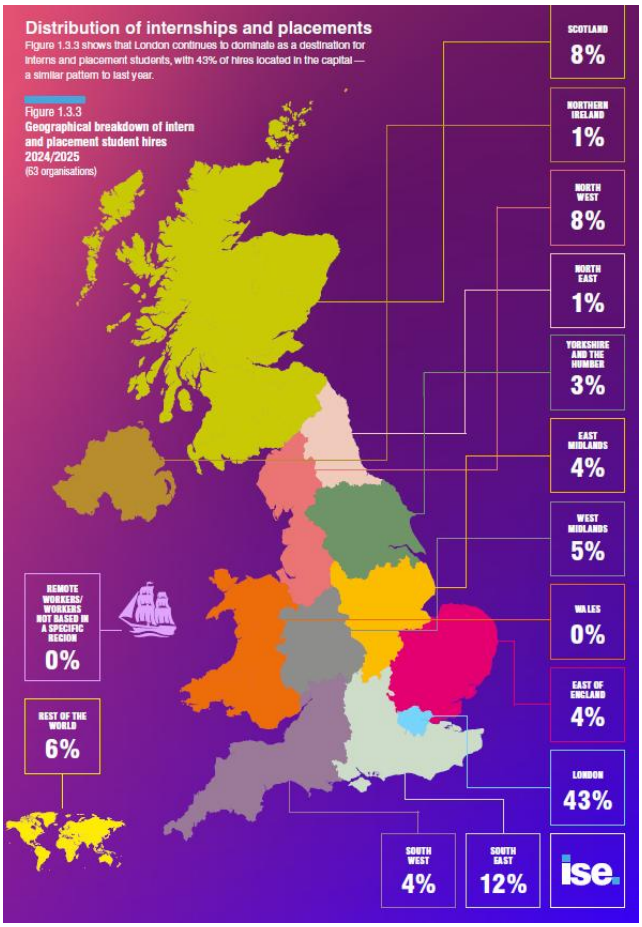
Supply is concentrated

ISE data collated in 2026 shows school work experience makes up 28% of the work experience, internship and placement opportunities offered by larger student employers. But it comes from a narrow base. Finance and professional services provide 48% of it and energy, engineering and industry 38%. Charity and public sector, digital and IT, and health employers offer almost none.

	Internships	Graduate Placements	T-level placements	School work experience	Other work experience	Proportion of whole
Proportion of whole	44%	17%	1%	28%	10%	
Built environment	7%	18%	42%	11%	6%	10%
Charity & Public	0%	4%	0%	0%	0%	1%
Digital & IT	7%	1%	23%	0%	0%	3%
Energy, Engineering & Industry	13%	20%	34%	38%	51%	25%
Finance & Professional services	47%	28%	1%	48%	43%	43%
Health & Pharmaceuticals	7%	4%	0%	0%	0%	4%
Legal	9%	0%	0%	3%	0%	5%
Retail & FMCG & Tourism	10%	25%	0%	1%	0%	9%

Source: Institute of Student Employers, 2026

Place matters too. 43% of intern and placement student hires by ISE members are in London and a further 12% in the South East. The North East and Northern Ireland have 1% each.



Source: ISE Student Recruitment Survey 2025

The scale of the challenge

According to research shared by the ISE, there are around 3.6 million secondary school learners and 2.1 million undergraduate students. A week of placements for every Year 10 and 11 pupil means roughly 720,000 placement weeks a year. A 45-day placement for every 16 to 18 year old would mean tens of millions of placement days.

For comparison, ISE members hired around 6,700 interns and placement students last year. Large employers cannot do this alone. Smaller employers and the public sector will need to step in, and they are exactly where provision is thinnest today. Educators also face a coordination challenge. Employer relationships and work-

related learning can sit across different departments, courses and services. An institution may have strong provision without a clear view of which students benefit or where gaps remain.

Expanding access means making better use of those relationships, sharing effective approaches and coordinating provision across the institution. It also means recognising the staff time needed to prepare students, support employers and review the learning.

Education and Employers found 94% of teachers say job shadowing is hard to organise, and 81% say the same of workplace visits.

Without a deliberate effort, access will keep depending on:

- geography
- family background
- social networks
- school resources

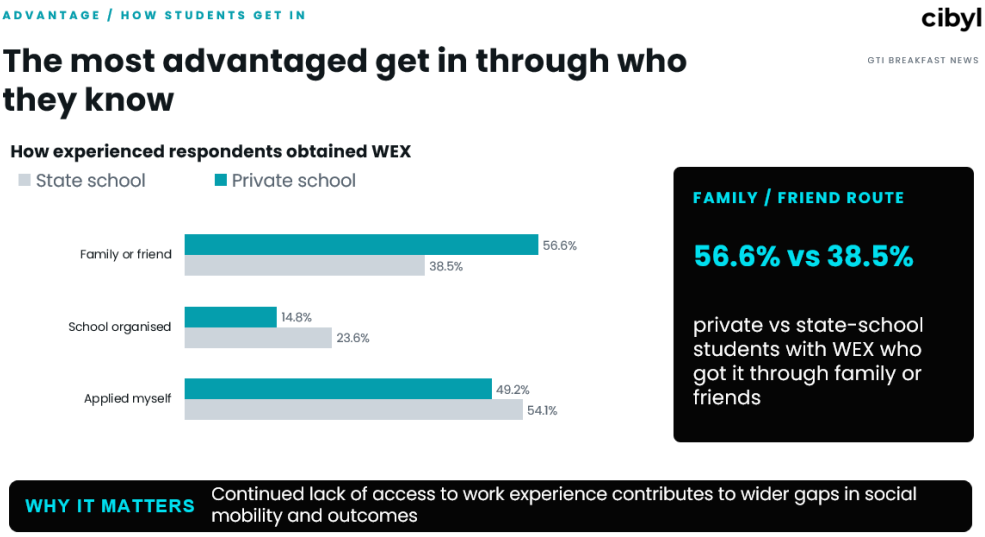
To explore ISE insights on how to make work experience work for your organisation, use this exclusive link created for Breakfast News attendees.

CHAPTER 3

The social mobility challenge

The event kept returning to one uncomfortable truth: work experience is unequally shared out.

Cibyl's research shows that among students who have done work experience, 57% of those at private schools got it through family or friends, against 39% at state schools. State-school students lean more on their school to arrange a placement (24% against 15%), and around half in both groups find opportunities by applying themselves.



Source: Cibyl School Leaver Research 2026

Teachers see the same thing. 78% told Education and Employers that family connections are the main reason some students get more out of work experience than others.

Participation is also lower among students receiving free school meals, young carers and learners from disadvantaged backgrounds.

This creates a cycle. Young people with professional networks get experiences that build confidence, awareness and employability. Those without them miss out on exactly the opportunities that could change their outcomes. Many are juggling caring responsibilities, family pressures or money worries, and they are unlikely to stumble across placements through informal contacts. They need employers to reach out to them.

Fair access also depends on whether students can take up an opportunity once it is offered.

Unpaid activity, travel costs and inflexible hours can make participation difficult for students balancing study with work or caring responsibilities. Application processes can also favour those who already know how to present their experience.

Educators and employers should consider these barriers when designing programmes. Timetabled projects, financial support, flexible delivery and supported applications can help widen participation.

The quality of the offer matters too. Students facing the greatest barriers should still have opportunities for meaningful employer contact, useful feedback and further progression.

If work experience is going to support social mobility, access cannot depend on who a young person knows or what they can afford. Young people also need the practical support to take part and benefit.

CHAPTER 4

What young people actually want

Several themes came through clearly when we heard directly from students.

Confidence comes through taking part

Students on Upskill Me employability programmes described arriving nervous and unsure, and leaving far more confident about talking to professionals and being in a workplace. They came away understanding that success at work depends on communication, confidence and relationships, not just grades.

Exposure changes perceptions

Seeing a workplace first hand challenges assumptions about corporate life. Seeing the culture, the flexibility and the inclusion for themselves made careers feel more open and relatable.

Support matters

Students said encouragement from employees made a big difference to their confidence. They value being able to ask questions, talk to professionals and be treated as active participants rather than observers.

Make the purpose clear

Students should understand how an experience relates to their interests, studies or future choices.

Give them a clear explanation of what they will do and what they could gain. Where possible, offer choices over the brief, role or sector they explore.

Check in as their interests develop. A student may finish an experience with different ambitions from those they brought to it. That can be a valuable outcome.

What gets in the way

Cibyl's research shows the biggest barriers are not knowing what to expect and feeling anxious about it. Travel and equipment matter for a smaller but real group.



Source: Cibyl School Leaver Research 2026

Students told researchers they want:

- clarity on working conditions
- to understand their responsibilities
- guidance and training
- a mentor or buddy
- genuine interaction with people at work

CHAPTER 5

What makes work experience meaningful?

Taking part is no longer enough on its own.

As a sector, we have got good at counting whether work experience happened. We are much less good at measuring what it achieved.

The Gatsby Benchmarks set out seven characteristics of a meaningful experience of the workplace:

1. a clear purpose, shared with the employer and the young person
2. learning outcomes that fit the young person's needs
3. plenty of two-way interaction with employees
4. the chance to meet a range of people from the workplace
5. a real task set by the employer
6. feedback from the employer on the young person's work
7. time to reflect on what they have learned.

Notice what is missing: duration. A well-designed two-hour session can have more impact than a badly planned fortnight.

That matters now that policy is set in weeks and days. The time is the container; the seven characteristics are what should fill it. A week of shadowing with no task and no feedback ticks the box on hours and misses the point.

For educators, this also creates an opportunity to connect work experience with authentic assessment. An employer brief can ask students to apply subject knowledge to a problem with competing priorities, incomplete information and a defined audience. The assessment can then consider the quality of their response and the judgement behind it.

A recommendation, prototype or presentation gives students something tangible to discuss. A short explanation of their decisions, supported by evidence of how their work developed, helps show their individual understanding and contribution.

Designed together, the experience and assessment can serve both academic learning and career development. Students leave with evidence of what they can do and a stronger basis for explaining it to employers.

So success should not be measured by hours delivered. It should be measured by what young people can do afterwards.

CHAPTER 6

The business case

Work experience often sits in a CSR or outreach budget and is judged on how many young people it reaches. The employers getting most from it judge it on what it feeds into their talent pipeline. Three numbers tell you whether yours is working:

- **Conversion:** how many participants go on to apply, and how many you hire.
- **Cost:** what a placement costs compared with a hire through open-market routes.
- **Retention:** how long hires who came through work experience stay, compared with other routes.

There is a bigger picture too. When one employer cuts early careers activity to save money, the saving is small, but the pool of talent shrinks for everyone in the sector, including them. That matters now, as policy asks employers to do more at the same time as ISE members expect internship and placement numbers to dip slightly next year.

The case for educators

For educators, work experience connects the promise of a course with what students can do beyond it. The case for investment reaches across the institution:

Recruitment: a clear offer of projects, placements and employer contact gives prospective students something tangible when considering where to study.

Learning: employer briefs and authentic assessment help students apply subject knowledge, exercise judgement and demonstrate their capabilities.

Fair access: experiences built into courses, supported by flexible routes, can reach students who lack professional contacts or time for additional unpaid activity.

Progression: students gain evidence they can use in applications and interviews, alongside a better understanding of their options for employment or further study.

Delivery needs to be sustainable. Coordinating employer relationships, sharing resources and combining appropriate formats can help institutions extend provision. The cost includes preparation, assessment and student support, as well as the activity itself.

The test is whether more students gain worthwhile experience and can use what they have learned. Track who participates, what they demonstrate and where they go next.

CHAPTER 7

Employer case studies

Norton Rose Fulbright

The firm's multi-route model shows how work experience can diversify the workforce and strengthen long-term talent pipelines. Each programme links to a future recruitment route, so participants can see a clear path forward.

United Utilities

United Utilities is moving away from traditional family-and-friends placements towards broader, structured programmes designed for fair access and real skills development.

BPP Retail Sector Skills Board

Retail employers are working with BPP and the British Retail Consortium on a national work experience blueprint, launching in October 2026, built around four stages:

- **Prepare:** plan, risk assess and equip hosts
- **Welcome:** induct, set expectations and safeguard

- **Experience:** structured, varied activities that build readiness and workplace skills
- **Reflect and progress:** feedback, putting skills into words, signposting and next steps

It shows how a whole sector can raise consistency and quality together.

Upskill Me

Upskill Me's programmes show the impact of repeated engagement, project-based learning and sustained contact with employers. Recent programmes report:

- 98% of students with a positive view of the employer
- 90% intending to apply
- 92% staying engaged afterwards

CHAPTER 8

The future of work experience

The future needs both scale and quality.

Work experience is becoming a journey rather than a one-off event. Employer encounters, simulations, projects and placements can build on one another, connected through the curriculum and careers support.

Virtual and hybrid experiences can widen access and reflect how people work. Remote projects give students practice in collaborating online, managing responsibilities and communicating progress. In-person experiences add workplace insight and opportunities to build relationships.

Authentic assessment can help students demonstrate what they have learned. Practical outputs, feedback and explanations of their decisions provide evidence they can use in future applications.

Technology can coordinate provision and help staff identify where support is needed. Human interaction gives students opportunities to ask questions, test ideas and understand their progress.

The challenge is to make these experiences available more widely, with a clear purpose and a useful next step for every learner.

ACTION PLAN

10 actions for employers

The clearest message from GTI Breakfast News was that employers should stop treating work experience as a standalone activity and manage it as part of long-term workforce strategy. These ten actions follow the five stages of a good placement: engage, prepare, experience, reflect and progress.

Engage

1. Treat work experience as talent strategy, not CSR

Build it into workforce planning, talent acquisition, inclusion and employer brand. The most mature organisations at the event had a clear line from work experience to future recruitment routes.

Key question: which future skills shortages could work experience help you fill?

2. Audit who is getting in

If most participants come through staff networks, schools you already know or advantaged groups, access is not yet fair. Cibyl's research shows background and contacts still shape who gets in.

- Analyse where applications come from
- Review free school meal participation
- Monitor geographical spread
- Review representation by ethnicity and gender

3. Move beyond friends and family

Informal placements have their place, but they should not be the main route in. Build open-access routes through schools, colleges, universities and specialist organisations.

For educators: identify who is missing out across courses and student groups. Use students' interests, previous experience and support needs to connect them with relevant opportunities. Make clear what they could gain.

Best practice: an application process any young person can use, whatever their network or background.

Prepare

4. Reduce nerves before day one

46% of students say work experience makes them anxious and 35% are unsure what it involves. A little preparation goes a long way.

- Send a pre-arrival guide
- Record a short welcome video
- Introduce mentors beforehand
- Explain what is expected
- Be clear on dress code, travel and logistics

For educators: connect the experience to intended learning and build preparation into the course where possible. Explain the task and expectations, address practical barriers and agree support arrangements with the employer.

Experience

5. Design around real work

Work experience should be about contributing, not watching. Students got most from real tasks and projects, not shadowing.

Ask: what piece of work will every participant contribute to?

6. Train managers to support learning

The quality of a placement often depends more on the supervisor than the programme design. Managers need guidance on:

- coaching young people
- giving feedback

- setting expectations
- supporting reflection
- building confidence

Remember: hosting is not the same as teaching.

For educators: combine projects, simulations and placements according to the learning purpose. Virtual activity can widen access and build skills for remote and hybrid working. Agree manageable employer touchpoints and provide support between them.

Reflect

7. Measure more than attendance

Most organisations count participation. Few measure what changed. Track:

- confidence
- career awareness
- workplace behaviours
- understanding of roles
- skills development

Success measure: what changed because of the experience?

For educators: Use employer informed authentic assessment to help students demonstrate how they apply knowledge and exercise judgement. Consider the output alongside each student's contribution and decisions. Give them opportunities to act on feedback and capture evidence for future applications.

8. Help participants capture their skills

Employers increasingly hire for behaviours and capabilities, so participants should leave with evidence they can use in future applications. Encourage them to record:

- the task they completed
- the outcome they delivered
- challenges they overcame

- feedback they received
- skills they showed

Progress

9. Show what comes next

Work experience should rarely be the end of the relationship. Build visible routes into:

- apprenticeships and degree apprenticeships
- internships
- campus ambassador programmes
- graduate recruitment

Question: what happens next for participants who want to stay in touch?

10. Scale through partnerships and technology

No employer can solve this alone. It needs employers, schools, colleges, universities, technology providers, policymakers and specialist delivery partners working together. Explore:

- virtual work experience
- employer projects
- skills profiling
- work-based learning platforms
- regional partnerships

The goal is to increase scale and quality at the same time.

For educators: help students identify a next step, whether further experience, employment or study. Connect participation and feedback across teams so support follows the learner. Review who benefits and use the findings to improve provision.

Conclusion

Work experience is at a turning point.

Government expectations are rising. Universities are committing to work-based learning for every student. Employers face growing skills gaps. And young people are asking for the opportunity.

What is needed now is coordinated action.

The evidence shared at GTI Breakfast News shows that good work experience builds confidence, improves employability, strengthens talent pipelines and supports social mobility. But only when it is designed with purpose, properly supported and linked to what comes next.

So, WEX on or WEX off? WEX on, but done properly.

As employers, educators and policymakers look ahead, the question is no longer whether work experience works. It is whether we are willing to invest at the level needed to make sure every young person can benefit from it.

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